

Her Weight In Gold

George Barr
McCutcheon



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Her Weight in Gold

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

GRAUSTARK
CASTLE CRANEYCROW
BREWSTER'S MILLIONS
THE SHERRODS
THE DAY OF THE DOG
BEVERLY OF GRAUSTARK
THE PURPLE PARASOL
NEDRA
COWARDICE COURT
JANE CABLE
THE FLYERS
THE DAUGHTER OF ANDERSON CROW
THE HUSBANDS OF EDITH
THE MAN FROM BRODNEY'S
THE ALTERNATIVE
TRUXTON KING
THE BUTTERFLY MAN
THE ROSE IN THE RING
WHAT'S-HIS-NAME
MARY MIDTHORNE
HER WEIGHT IN GOLD



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Her Weight in Gold

By

George Barr McCutcheon

Author of "Graustark"

"Beverly of Graustark," etc.

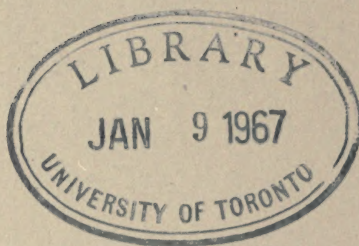
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WILLIAM BRIGGS

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To
James Whitcomb Riley

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ELL, the question is: how much does she weigh?" asked Eddie Ten Eyck with satirical good humor.

His somewhat flippant inquiry followed the heated remark of General Horatio Gamble, who, in desperation, had declared that his step-daughter, Martha, was worth her weight in gold.

The General was quite a figure in the town of Essex. He was the president of the Town and Country Club and, besides owning a splendid stud, was also the possessor of a genuine Gainsborough,

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picked up at the shop of an obscure dealer in antiques in New York City for a ridiculously low price (two hundred dollars, it has been said), and which, according to a rumour started by himself, was worth a hundred thousand if it was worth a dollar, although he contrived to keep the secret from the ears of the county tax collector. He had married late in life, after accumulating a fortune that no woman could despise, and of late years had taken to frequenting the Club with a far greater assiduity than is customary in most presidents.

Young Mr. Ten Eyck's sarcasm was inspired by a mind's-eye picture of Miss Martha Gamble. To quote Jo Grigsby, she was "so plain that all comparison began and ended with her." Without desiring to appear ungallant, I may

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say that there were many homely young women in Essex; but each of them had the delicate satisfaction of knowing that Martha was incomparably her superior in that respect.



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“I am not jesting, sir,” said the General with asperity. “Martha may not be as good-looking as—er—some girls that I’ve seen, but she is a jewel, just the same. The man who gets her for a wife will be a blamed sight luckier than the fellows who marry the brainless little fools we see trotting around like butterflies.” (It was the first time that Eddie had heard of trotting butterflies.)

“She’s a fine girl,” was his conciliatory remark.

“She is pure gold,” said the General with conviction. “Pure gold, sir.”

“A nugget,” agreed Eddie expansively. “A hundred and eighty pound-nugget, General. Why don’t you send her to a refinery?”

The General merely glared at him and subsided into thoughtful silence. He was in the habit of falling into



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deep spells of abstraction at such times as this. For the life of him, he couldn't understand how Martha came by her excessive plainness. Her mother was looked upon as a beautiful woman and her father (the General's predecessor) had been a man worth looking at, even from a successor's point of view. That Martha should have grown up to such appalling ugliness was a source of wonder, not only to the General, but to Mrs. Gamble herself.

Young Mr. Ten Eyck was the most impecunious spendthrift in Essex. He lived by his wits, with which he was more generously endowed than anything in the shape of gold or precious jewels. His raiment was accumulative. His spending-money came to him through an allowance that his grandmother considerably delivered to him at

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regular periods, but as is the custom with such young men he was penniless before the quarter was half over. At all times he was precariously close to being submerged by his obligations. Yet trouble sat lightly upon his head, if one were to judge by outward appearances. Beneath a bland, care-free exterior, however, there lurked in Edward's bosom a perpetual pang of distress over the financial situation.

What worried him most was the conviction that all signs pointed toward the suspension of credit in places where he owed money, and, as he owed without discrimination, the future seemed hard to contemplate.

Prudent mothers stood defiantly between him and what might have been prosperity. He could win the hearts of daughters with shameful regularity and

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ease, but he could not delude the heads of the families to which they belonged. They knew him well and wisely.

The conversation between him and



General Gamble took place in the reading-room of the Town and Country Club. There was a small table between them, and glasses.

“What is the market price of gold

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to-day, General?" asked Eddie impudently, after he had watched the old man's gloomy countenance out of the corner of his eye for the matter of three minutes or more.

The General regarded him with deep scorn. "Gold? What do you know about gold? You seldom see anything more precious than copper."

"That's no joke," agreed Eddie with his frank smile. "I am the only, original penny limit. That reminds me, General. I meant to speak of it before, but somehow it slipped my mind. Could you lend me——"

The General held up his hand. "I've been waiting for that, Eddie. Don't humiliate yourself by asking for a small amount. I haven't the remotest idea how much you already owe me, but it doesn't matter in view of the fact

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that you'll never pay it. You were about to request the loan of ten dollars, my boy. Why not ask for a respectable amount?—say, fifty dollars.”

Eddie's heart leaped. “That's just the amount I meant to ask you to let me have for a week or two. 'Pon my word, it is.”

“Well,” said the General, taking a notebook from his pocket and carefully jotting down an entry with his gold-tipped pencil, “I cheerfully give it to you, Eddie. I shall credit your account with that amount. Fifty dollars—um! It is a new system I have concluded to adopt. Every time you ask me for a loan I shall subtract the amount from what you already owe me. In time, you see, the whole debt will be lifted, and you'll not owe me a cent.”

Eddie blinked. A slow grin crept

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into his face as he grasped the irony in the General's scheme.

"Fine financing, General. It suits me to a dot. By the way, do you think you can spare another hundred or two?"

"The books are closed for the month," said the General placidly. He rang the bell on the table. "More ice, boy, and the same bottle. As I was saying, Eddie, I can't for the life of me see why you fellows are so blind when it comes to Martha. She is——"

"We are *not* blind," interrupted Eddie, not at all annoyed by his failure to negotiate the loan. "That's just the trouble. If a blind man came along, I've no doubt he could see something attractive in her."

"Damme! If she were my own daughter, I'd thrash you for that remark, sir."

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"If she were your own daughter, you wouldn't be discussing her with a high-ball in your hand."

The General coughed. "Ahem! Eddie, I'd give a good deal to see that girl married. Leave the bottle on the table, boy. She will have money—a lot of it—one of these days. There are dozens of young men that we know who'd do 'most anything for money. I—— By George!" He broke off to

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stare with glittering eyes at the face of the young man opposite. A great thought was expanding in his brain.

Eddie shifted nervously. "Why are you looking at me like that? I don't need it that badly."

"I'd never thought of you, Eddie,—'pon my word I hadn't. Not until this moment. You need money worse than any one I know. There isn't another girl in town who would marry you, and Martha *would*. Believe me, she would! And let me tell you, sir, you couldn't find a truer wife than Martha. You——"

"She couldn't help being true," mused Eddie, rattling the ice in his empty glass. The General pushed the bottle toward him.

"She is a bit older than you, I'll admit," pursued the General reflectively.

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“Worth her weight in gold,” he murmured with a sort of ecstasy in his voice.

Young Ten Eyck assumed an injured



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air. "I am poor, General Gamble, but I am *not* blind."

"She likes you," went on the older man, revelling in the new-found hope. "You don't amount to much,—and she knows it, I suppose,—but you can have her, my boy. She'll be the richest girl in Essex when I die. Take her, my boy; I gladly give my consent. Will you permit me to congratu——"

"One moment, if you please. In a case like this, you would *never* die. It would be just my luck. No, I thank you. I decline the honour. If you could perform a miracle and transform her into *real* gold, I might consider the proposition, but not as it now stands."

"She weighs about one-eighty," said the General speculatively.

Eddie glanced at him sharply. "One

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hundred and eighty pounds in gold. Quite a pile, eh?"

The General was silent for a long time, permitting the vague idea to thrive in his harassed mind. His young companion was moodily trying to estimate the value of one hundred and eighty pounds of virgin gold.

At last the General reached a conclusion. It was a rather heroic effort. He relighted his cigar with trembling fingers.

"I suppose you haven't heard of the wedding present I intend to bestow upon the fortunate man who leads her to the altar?" said he, casting the fatal die.

"No; but a separate house and lot wouldn't be despised, I should say."

"Nonsense. By the way, Eddie, this must not go any farther. It's strictly

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entre nous. I don't want to have the dear girl pestered to death by fortune hunters. On his wedding day the man who marries Martha is to have the equivalent of her weight in double eagles. Isn't that ra-ather handsome?"

He sank back and waited for the seed to sink deeply into Ten Eyck soil. Eddie's eyelids flickered. The grin of

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a Cheshire cat came to his lips involuntarily and remained there without modification for the matter of an hour or two.

“Great!” he said at last.

“I must be on my way,” observed the wily step-father, beating a retreat so hastily that Eddie missed the opportunity to scoff. But the contemplative smile remained just as he had left it.

Several days passed before the two met again. The General had sowed wisely, and he was reasonably certain of the harvest. He knew that it would be hard for young Ten Eyck to bring himself to the sacrificial altar; but that he would come and would bend his neck was a foregone conclusion. He went on the theory that if you give a man rope enough he'll hang himself, and he felt that Eddie was almost at

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the end of his rope in these cruel days.

As for Eddie, he tried to put the thought out of his mind, but as time

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went on he caught himself many times —(with a start of shame)—trying to approximate the worth of Martha Gamble on the basis set forth by her stepfather. The second day after the interview he consulted a friend of his who happened to be a jeweller. From him he ascertained the present market value of twenty-four carat gold. So much for the start!

His creditors were threatening to sue or to “black-list” him; his friends long since had begun to dodge him, fearing the habitual request for temporary loans; his allowance was not due for several weeks. Circumstances were so harsh that even Martha appeared desirable by contrast. He felt an instinctive longing for rest, and peace, and—pecuniary absolution.

He was therefore deserving of pity

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when he finally surrendered to the inevitable. How he cursed himself—(and



his creditors)—as he set out to find the General on that bright spring day when

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every other living creature on earth seemed to be happy and free from care. Kismet!

General Gamble was reading in a quiet corner of the Club. That is to say, he had the appearance of one reading. As a matter of fact, he had been watching Eddie's shy, uncertain evolutions for half an hour or more, and he chuckled inwardly. As many as ten times the victim strolled through the reading room, on the pretext of looking for some one. Something told the General that he was going to lose Martha.

At last Eddie approached him. He came with the swift impetuosity of a man who has decided and is afraid to risk a reaction.

"Hello, General," was his crisp greeting as he dropped into the chair

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which the astute old gentleman had placed, with premeditation, close to his own some time before. He went straight to the point. "I've been thinking over what you said the other day about Martha. Well, I'll marry her."

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"You!" exclaimed the General, simulating incredulity. "You!"

"Yes. I'll be *it*. How much does she really weigh?"

"Are—are you in earnest, my boy?" cried the other. "Why, she'll be tickled to death!"

"May I have her?"

"God bless you,—*yes!*"

"I suppose I ought to go up and see her and—and tell her I love her," said Eddie lugubriously. "Or," with a fine inspiration, "perhaps you wouldn't mind telling her for me. I——"

"Tell her yourself, you young rascal," cried the General in fine good humour, poking his prospective stepson-in-law in the ribs.

Eddie winced. "You can do that to me now, but if you jab me in the ribs

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after I'm married I'll jab you in the eye."

"Good! I like your spirit. Gad, I love a fighting-man! And now, my boy, it seems to me there's no sense in delaying matters. You have my consent. As a matter of form, you ought to get Martha's. She'll take you, of course, but I—I suppose she would like the idea of being proposed to. They all do. I daresay you two can settle the point in a jiffy in some quiet nook up at the—— But, there! I shall not offer suggestions to you in an affair of the heart, my son. Will you be up to see her this evening?"

Eddie drew a long breath. "If—if she has no other engagement."

"Engagement?" gasped the General with popping eyes. "She hasn't sat up after eight o'clock in four years, except

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on Christmas Eve. You won't be disturbed; so come around."

"Perhaps, to be sure of finding her up, I'd better come to dinner."

"By all means. Stay as late as you like, too. She won't get sleepy to-night. Not a bit of it." He arose to depart.

"Just a moment, General," said Ed-die curtly. "We've got a few preliminaries to arrange before I commit myself. Here is a paper for you to sign. Business is business, you know, and this is the first really business-like thing I've ever done. Be good enough to read this paper very carefully before signing."

General Gamble put on his glasses and read the brief but ample contract which bound him to pay to Edward Peabody Ten Eyck, on the day that he was married to Martha Gamble, for better

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or for worse, an amount equivalent to the value of her weight in pure gold. He hesitated for one brief, dubious mo-



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ment, then called for pen, ink, and paper. When these articles were brought to him, he deliberately drew up a second contract by which Edward Ten Eyck bound himself to wed Martha Gamble (and no other) on a day to be named by mutual consent at a later date—but not very much later, he was privately resolved.

“Now,” said he, “we’ll each sign one. You sha’n’t get the better of me, my boy.”

Each signed in the presence of two waiters, neither of whom knew the nature of the instruments.

“Troy weight,” said the General magnanimously. “She is a jewel, you know.”

“Certainly. It’s stipulated in the contract—twenty-four carat gold. You said pure, you remember. You may



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have noticed that I take her at the prevailing market price of gold. It is now four cents a carat. Twenty-four carats in a pennyweight. That makes ninety-six cents per pennyweight. Twenty pennyweight in an ounce, and there we have nineteen dollars and twenty cents per ounce. We'll—we'll weigh her in by ounces."

"That's reasonable. The price of gold isn't likely to fluctuate much."

"It must be distinctly understood that you keep her well-fed from this day on, General. I won't have her fluctuating. She hasn't any silly notions about reducing, has she?"

"My dear fellow, she poses as a Venus," cried the General.

"Good! And here's another point: Pardon me for suggesting it, but you understand that she's to weigh in—er—

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that is to say, her clothing is to be weighed in with her."

"What's that?"

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“ You heard what I said. She’s to be settled for—dressed.”

“ Good Lord, she isn’t a chicken!”

“ Nobody said she was. It is fit and proper that her garments should be weighed with her. Hang it all, man, I’m marrying her clothes as well as anything else.”

“ I will not agree to that. It’s preposterous.”

“ I don’t mean her entire wardrobe. Just the going-away gown and hat. You can’t very well ask her to weigh herself without any—— But as gentlemen we need not pursue the matter any farther. You shall have your way about it.”

“ She has a fine pair of scales in her bedroom. She weighs herself every night for her own gratification. I don’t see why she can’t do it once or twice for my sake.”

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“But women are such dreadful liars about their own weight. She’ll be sure to lop off fifteen or twenty pounds in the telling. Hang it, I want witnesses.”

The General assumed a look of distress. “Remember, sir, that you are speaking of your future wife. You’ll have to take her word.”

Eddie slumped down in his chair, muttering something about niggardliness.

“I suppose I’ll have to concede the point.” His eyes twinkled. “I say, it would be a horrible shock



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to you, General, if she were to refuse me to-night."

"She sha—*won't!*" said the General, setting his jaw, but turning a shade paler. "She'll jump at the chance."

Eddie sighed dismally. "Doesn't it really seem awful to you?"

"Having you for a son-in-law? *Yes.*"

"You know I'm only doing this because I want to set up in business for myself and need the money," explained the groom-elect in an effort to justify himself. "Oh, another little point. I'd almost forgotten it. I suppose it will be perfectly convenient for us to live with you for a year or two, until I——"

"No!" thundered the General. "Not by a long shot! You go to housekeeping at once, do you understand?"

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“But think of her poor mother’s feelings——”

“Her mother has nothing whatever to do with it, sir. See here, we’ll put that in the contract.” He was visibly disturbed by the thought of what the oversight might have meant to him. “And now, when shall we have the wedding?”

“Perhaps we’d better leave that to Martha.”

“We’ll leave nothing to anybody.”

“She’ll want to get a trousseau together and all that sort of thing. I’m ready to go through with it at any time, but you know what girls are.” He was perspiring.

“Yes,” said the General with a reminiscent light in his eye. “I daresay they all enjoy a few weeks of courtship and love-making.”

Eddie gulped suddenly and then shot

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a quick, hunted look toward the buffet door.



“Have a drink?” demanded the other abruptly. He had caught the sign of danger.

They strolled into the buffet, arm - in - arm, one loving the world in general, the other hating everybody in it, including the General. Be-

fore they parted Eddie Ten Eyck extracted a solemn promise from his future

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step-father-in-law that he would ascertain Martha's exact weight and report the figure to him on the following day.

"It will seem easier if I know just about what to expect," explained the young man.

That very afternoon the General, with a timidity that astonished him, requested his step-daughter to report her correct weight to him on the following morning. He kept his face well screened behind his newspaper while speaking, and his voice was a little thick.

"What for, father?" asked Martha, looking up from her book in surprise. Her eyes seemed to grow even larger than the lenses of her spectacles.

"Why, you see—er—I'm figuring on a little more insurance," he stammered.

"What has my weight to do with it?"

"It isn't life insurance," he made

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haste to explain. A bright idea struck him. "It is fire insurance, my dear."

"I don't see what my——"

"Of course you don't," he interrupted genially. "It's this way. The fire insurance companies are getting absurdly finicky about the risks. Now they insist on knowing the weight of every inmate of the houses they insure. Has something to do with the displacement of oxygen, I believe. Your mother and I—and the servants, too—expect to be weighed to-night."

"Oh," she said, and resumed her reading.

He waited for a while, fumbling nervously with his watch chain.

"By the way, my dear," he said, "what have you been doing to that bully chap, Eddie Ten Eyck?"

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“Doing to him? What do you mean?”

“Just what I say.”

“I haven’t seen the miserable loafer in months,” she said. Her voice was

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heavy, but unlike that of a man. For some reason she shuffled uneasily in her chair. The book dropped into her capacious lap.

“You’ve been doing something behind my back, you sly minx,” he chided. “What do you think happened to-day?”

“To Eddie Ten Eyck?”

“In a way, yes. He came up to me in the Club and asked my permission to pay—er—court to you, my dear. He said he loved you better than—— Hey! Look out there! What the dev—— Hi, Mother! Come here quick! Good Heaven, she’s going to die!”

Poor Martha had collapsed in a heap, her arms dangling limply over the side of the chair, her eyes bulging and blinking in a most grotesque manner. At first glance one would have sworn she



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was strangling. Afterwards the General denounced himself as an unmitigated idiot for having given her such a shock. He ought to have known better.

Mrs. Gamble rushed downstairs in great alarm, and it was not long before they had Martha breathing naturally, although the General almost made that an impossibility by the ruthless manner in which he fanned her with the very book she had been reading—a heavy volume which he neglected to open.

The whirligig room reduced itself to a library for Martha once more, not so monotonous as it once had been, no doubt, but still a library. Out of the turmoil of her own emotions, she managed to grasp enough of what the General was saying to convince herself that this was not another dream but a reality, and she became so excited that her

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mother advised her to go to bed for a while before dinner, if she expected to appear at her best when Eddie arrived.

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For the first time since early childhood, Martha blushed as she attempted to trip lightly upstairs. As a matter of fact, she *did* trip on next to the top step and sprawled. Under ordinary circumstances she would have been as mad as a wet hen, but on this happy occasion she merely cried out, when her parents dashed into the hall below on hearing the crash:

“It’s good luck to fall upstairs!”

The fires of life had been rekindled, and when such a thing happens to a person of Martha’s horse-power, the effect is astonishing. At four o’clock she began dressing for the coming suitor. When he arrived at seven, she was still trying to decide whether her hair looked better by itself or with augmentations.

Below, in the huge library, Eddie Ten Eyck sat disconsolate, nervously con-

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templating the immediate future. He was all alone. Not even a servant was to be seen or heard. It was as still as the Christmas Eve whose jingle we love so well.



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Never in all his aimless existence had he felt so small, so unimportant, so put-upon as at this moment. His gaze, sweeping the ceiling of the library, tried to penetrate to the sacred precincts above. Even the riches and the stateliness of the Gamble mansion failed to reimburse his fancy for the losses it was sustaining with each succeeding minute of suspense. Dimly he recalled that General Gamble had spent nearly half a million dollars in the construction of this imposing edifice. The library was worth more than one hundred thousand dollars; the stables were stocked with innumerable thoroughbreds; the landed estate was measured by sections instead of acres; the stocks and bonds were—— But even as he considered the question of assets, there surged up before him an overwhelming liability that



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brought the General's books to balance.

By this time, Eddie had become so proficient in the art of rapid calculation that he could estimate within a few ounces just what a person would have to weigh in order to be worth as much as the library, the mansion, or the bonds. The great Gainsborough that hung in the west end of the room corresponded in value (if reports were true concerning the price Gamble had paid for it) to a woman weighing a shade over two hundred and three pounds troy.

He lifted a handsome bronze figure from the library table and murmured: "It's worth a ten-pound baby, twenty-two hundred dollars and a fraction."

The General came in, followed closely by the butler, who bore a tray holding at least ten cocktails. After the greetings, Eddie glanced uneasily at the cocktails.

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“Is—is it to be as big a dinner as all this?” he asked ruefully.

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"Oh, no. Just family, my boy; we four. The women don't drink, Eddie, so help yourself."

Eddie gratefully swallowed three in rapid succession.

"I see you mean to make it absolutely necessary for me to take the gold cure," he said with a forlorn smile.

Martha put in appearance at seventy-three, having kept dinner waiting for half an hour, much to the amazement of those who had lived with her long enough to know her promptness in appearing for meals.

Mr. Ten Eyck, who was a rather good-looking chap and fastidious to a degree, did not possess the strength to keep his heart anywhere near the customary level. It went hurtling to his very boots. He shook hands with the blushing young woman and then in-

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voluntarily shrank toward the cocktails, disregarding the certainty that he would find them lukewarm and tasteless.

She was gotten up for the occasion. But, as it was not her costume that he was to embrace in matrimony, we will omit a description of the creation she



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wore. It was pink, of course, and cut rather low in order to protect her face from the impudent gaze of man.

Her face? Picture the face of the usual heroine in fiction and then contrive to think of the most perfect antithesis, and you have Martha in your mind's eye much more clearly than through any description I could hope to present.

She was squat. Her somewhat brawny shoulders sloped downward and forward—and perhaps a little sidewise, I am not sure about that. Her hair was straw-coloured and stringy in spite of the labour she had expended on it with curling-iron and brush. As to her face, the more noticeable features were a very broad, flat nose; a comparatively chinless under jaw, on which grew an acci-

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dental wisp of hair or two; a narrow and permanently decorated upper lip. When she smiled — well, the effect was discouraging, to say the least. Her eyes were pale and prominent. In spite



of all this, practice in rouging might have helped her a little, but she had had no practice. Young men never came to the house, and it was not worth while to keep up appearances for the old ones who were content to dodder at the end of the way. You would say at a glance that she was a very strong and enduring

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person, somewhat along the lines of a suffragette ward politician.

The dinner was a genial one, after all. The General was at his best, and the wine was perfect. In lucid moments, Eddie found himself reflecting: "If I can drink enough of this I'll have delirium tremens and then I won't have to believe all that I see."

Martha had always called him Eddie. In fact, every one called him Eddie. He was that sort of a chap. To-night, he observed, with a hazy interest, she addressed him as Mr. Ten Eyck, and rather frequently, at that. It was: "Do you really think so, Mr. Ten Eyck?" or "How very amusing, Mr. Ten Eyck," or "Good gracious, Mr. Ten Eyck," until poor Eddie, unused to this distinction, reached a point where he muttered something in way of protest that caused



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the General to cough violently in order to give his guest a chance to recover himself before it was too late.

After dinner the General and Mrs. Gamble retired somewhat precipitously, leaving the young people alone.

Eddie heaved a tremendous sigh of decision and bravely crossed the room. Martha was seated upon the davenport, nervously toying with her fan. He saw with misgiving that she evidently expected something was going to happen. Her eyes were downcast.

He stood silent and somewhat awed before her for many minutes, taking the final puffs at an abbreviated cigarette. Then he abruptly sat down at the opposite end of the couch. As he did so, she thought she heard him mutter something about "one hundred and seventy, at the lowest."

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“So many people have given up playing golf, Mr. Ten Eyck,” she said. “I am surprised that you keep it up.”

“Golf?” he murmured blankly.

“Weren’t you speaking of your score for the eighteen holes?”

He gazed at her helplessly for a moment, then set his jaw.



“Say, Martha,” he began, in a high and unnatural treble, “I am a man of few words. Will you marry me? Oh!

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Ouch! What the dickens are you doing? O—oh! Don't jump at me like that!"

The details are painful and it isn't necessary to go into them. Suffice it to say, she told him that he had always been her ideal and that she had worshipped him from childhood's earliest days. He, on the other hand, confessed, with more truth than she could have guessed, that he had but recently come to a realisation of her true worth, and what she really meant to him.

She set the wedding day for November the eleventh,—just seven weeks off.

Before leaving,—she kept him until nearly twelve,—he playfully came up behind her as she stood near the table, and, placing his hands under her elbows, said:

"Hold 'em stiff now."

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Then, to her amazement, he tried to lift her from the floor. He couldn't budge her.

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"It's all right," he exclaimed exultantly and refused to explain.

That night in his dreams an elephant came along and stood for a while on his chest, but he was used to it by that time, and didn't mind.

The next morning, General Gamble reported by telephone that Martha weighed one hundred and sixty-eight pounds and nine ounces. A minute later, Eddie was at his desk calculating.

On the twenty-third of September she weighed two thousand and twenty-five ounces troy. At nineteen dollars and twenty cents an ounce she was then worth \$38,880. With any sort of luck, he figured, she might be expected to pick up a few pounds as the result of her new-found happiness and peace of mind. Her worries were practically over. Contented people always put on flesh. If

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everything went well, she ought to represent at least \$40,000 on her wedding day. Perhaps more.

He haunted the Country Club by day and the town clubs by night, always pre-occupied and figuring, much to the astonishment of his friends and cronies. He scribbled inexplicable figures on the



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backs of golf cards, bar checks, and menus.

By the end of the first week he had made definite promises to all of his creditors. He guaranteed that every one should be paid before the middle of November. Moreover, he set aside in his calculations the sum of \$7,000 for the purchase of a new house. Early in the second week he had virtually expended \$15,000 of what he expected to receive, and was giving thanks for increased opportunities.

He called at the Gamble house regularly, even faithfully. True, he urged Martha to play on the piano nearly all of the time, but to all intents and purposes it was a courtship.

When the engagement was announced, the town—in utter ignorance of the conspiracy—went into convulsions. The

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half-dozen old maids in upper circles
who had long since given up hope began
to prink and perk themselves into an

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amazing state of rejuvenation,—revival, you might say. They tortured themselves with the hope that never dies. They even lent money to impecunious gentlemen who couldn't believe their senses and went about pinching themselves.

Eddie Ten Eyck's credit was so good that he succeeded in borrowing nearly five thousand dollars from erstwhile adamantine sceptics.

One day the General met him in the street. The old soldier wore a troubled look.

"She's sick," he said without preamble. "Got pains all over her and chills, too."

"Is it serious?" demanded Eddie.

"I don't know. Neither does the doctor. He's waiting for developments. Took a culture to-day. She's in bed, however."



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"*She must not die,*" said Eddie, a desperate gleam in his eye. "I—can't afford to have anything like that happen now. Can't she be vaccinated?"

At the end of the second day thereafter it was known all over town that Martha Gamble was ill with typhoid fever. She was running a temperature of 104 degrees and two doctors had come up from New York to consult with the Essex physician, bringing with them a couple of trained nurses. They said her heart was good.

After the consultation, the General and Eddie sat alone in the library, woe-begone and disconsolate.

"They think they can pull her through," said the former vaguely.

"Curse 'em," grated Eddie; "they've *got* to do it. If there is the least prospect of her dying, General, I must insist

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that the wedding day be moved forward. I'll—I'll marry her to-day. By Jove, it might go a long way toward reducing her temperature."

"Impossible! We shall stick to the original agreement."

"Confound you, I believe you are



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hoping she'll die before the eleventh of November. It would be just like you, General Gamble."

"I'm not hoping for anything of the sort, sir," thundered the other. "But, if it *should* happen——" He did not finish the sentence, but there was a green light in his eyes.

Eddie was silent for many minutes.

"And if she *should* die, where do I come in, or get off, or whatever is the proper thing to say in the circumstances? It wouldn't be fair to me, General Gamble. You know it wouldn't. It would be a damned outrage. Here am I, a devoted lover, eager to make her happy—to *make her last moments* happy ones, mind you, and you sit there and deny her the consolation of——"

"All's fair in love, my boy," said the General blandly.



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“ Rats! ”

“ Martha wasn’t strong enough to stand the excitement. It was like a sudden and frightful change in the weather. Her constitution couldn’t fight it off.”

“ Constitution? Good Lord! ”

“ We ought to make allowances, my boy.”

“ I am in no position to make allowances. Are these doctors any good? ”

“ The best in New York City.”

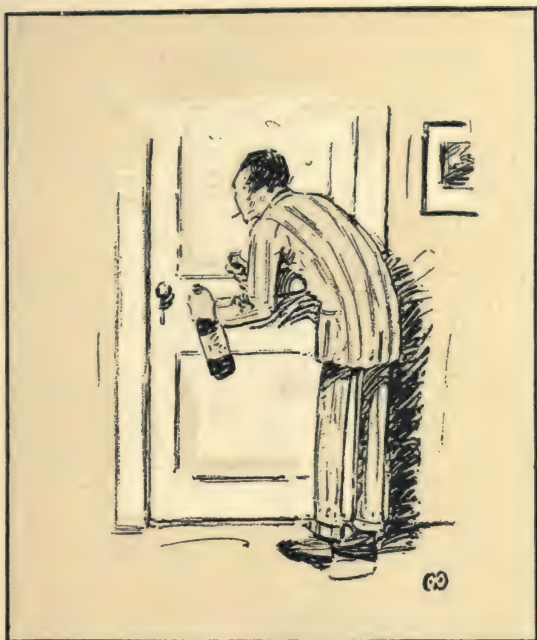
“ And the nurses? Everything depends on good nursing.”

“ They are real Canadians.”

“ General, up to the time I was eleven years old I said my prayers every night. I’m going to begin again to-night,” said Eddie solemnly, as he passed his hand across his brow.

The days went by with monotonous

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similarity. Bright or dark, wet or dry, they looked the same to Eddie Ten Eyck. At first he had been permitted to visit her once or twice a day, staying for a few minutes on each occasion. Af-

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ter a while the visits were stopped by the doctor's order. But still he haunted the Gamble mansion. He waylaid the doctor; he bribed or coerced the nurses; he watched the sick-room door with the eye of a hungry dog; he partook inordinately of the General's liquors. Martha was delirious, that much he was able to gather by persistent inquiry. She seemed obsessed with the idea that she and Eddie were to keep house in Heaven, with two cherubs and a hypodermic syringe.

Mrs. Gamble was deeply touched and not a little surprised by the devotion of her daughter's fiancé. She turned to him in these hours of despair and gave to him a large share of her pity and consolation. She asked him to pray for Martha. He said he had been praying for some one else nearly all his life, but

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henceforth would put in a word for Martha.

The wedding day was near at hand when an unexpected and alarming complication set in. The doctors were hurriedly gathered in consultation. There was a crisis.

One of the nurses confided to Mr. Ten Eyck that there was no hope, but the other declared that if the patient survived the eighth of November she would "be out of the woods." The eighth was



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three days off. Those three days were spent by Eddie in a state of fearful suspense. He implored Providence and Fate to stand by him until after the eleventh. He went so far as to add a couple of days to include the thirteenth, not being superstitious. The night of the eighth was a memorable one. No one in the Gamble house went to bed. The ninth came and then the doctors appeared with glad tidings. The crisis was past and there was every chance in the world for the patient to recover, unless, of course, some unforeseen complication intervened.

Eddie staggered out to the stables and performed a dance of joy.

“What’s her temperature?” he demanded of one of the grooms, absently repeating a question he had asked five thousand times during the past few

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weeks. "I beg your pardon, Smith."
Then he hurried back to the house.

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Meeting one of the doctors he gripped him by the arm.

“Is she sure to live, doc—doctor?”

“Forever,” said the doctor, meaning to comfort him.

“No!” gasped Eddie.

“Let me congratulate you, Mr. Ten Eyck. She is quite rational now and—pardon me if I repeat a sick-room secret—she declares that there shall be no postponement of the wedding. She is superstitious about postponements.”

Eddie hesitated. “Ahem! Is—is she emaciated?”

“No more than might be expected.”

“I—I hope she hasn’t wasted very much.”

“Skin and bones,” said the doctor with the most professional bluntness.

Eddie mopped his brow. “You—you don’t mean it! See here, doctor, you

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ought to advise very strongly against the—er—marriage at this time. Tell her it would kill her. The shock, I



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mean. I am willing to wait—*God knows*, I am only too willing to wait—until she is strong and well and herself once more. Tell her——”

“Perhaps you would better talk it over with her father, Mr. Ten Eyck. I am not——”

“Her father——” began Eddie, but caught himself up.

“I would not answer for her safety if a postponement were even suggested. Her heart is set on it, my dear fellow. She will be strong enough to go through with it.”

“But I want to be married in church.”

“I daresay you will agree with me when I say that your feelings are not to be considered in a crisis of this kind,” said the doctor coldly, and moved away.

At noon on the eleventh Martha awoke from a sound and restful sleep. Sweet

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lassitude enveloped her, but her mind went groping for something that had been troubling her in a vague sort of way for the last forty-eight hours.

"Is it the eleventh?" she whispered, stretching out her hand to the watchful nurse.

"Yes, my dear. Now try to go to sleep again——"

"Where is Mr. Ten Eyck?"

"Sh!"

"What time is it?"

"Now don't worry about the time——"

"Is it night or day?"

"It is noon."

"I am to be married at eight o'clock this evening, Miss Feeney."

"Yes, yes, I know," soothingly.

"You might send word to Mr. Ten Eyck that I shall be ready. He may

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forget the ring unless you tell him that—there—is—to be—no post——” She went to sleep in the middle of postponement.

While the nurses were preparing her for the ceremony, General Gamble sent word into the sick-room that the doctor desired her correct weight—for scientific purposes.

The patient, too weak to help herself, was lifted upon the scales, where she remained long enough for it to be seen that she weighed seventy-three pounds and eight ounces. She was then hustled into bed, but seemed to be in even better spirits than before, confiding to the nurses that she knew Mr. Ten Eyck was partial to slender women, and that if she had anything to do with it she'd never weigh more than one hundred and ten again, “as long as she lived.”

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“One hundred and ten is a lovely weight, don’t you think, Miss Feeney?” she asked.

Miss Feeney was feeling her pulse. The other nurse was trying to stick a mouth thermometer between the patient’s lips.

“It is a much lovelier weight than seventy-three,” said Miss Feeney gently.

The General, in the privacy of his bed-chamber, reduced the pounds to ounces and found that Martha, in her present state, represented eight hundred and eighty-four ounces. He could not suppress a chuckle, even though he felt very mean about it. She was worth \$16,972 in gold. Her illness had cost him approximately \$2000 in doctors’ fees, *et cetera*, but it had cost Eddie Ten Eyck \$21,911 in pure gold, with twenty cents over in silver.

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It is said that the bridegroom almost collapsed when he looked for the first time upon his emaciated investment. It was worse than he had expected. She was literally "skin and bones."

Mechanically, semi-paralysed, he made the responses to the almost staccato words of the clergyman. The ceremony was hurried through at a lively rate, but to Eddie it seemed to take hours. Her fingers felt like a closed fan in his own pulseless hand. He replied "I do" and "I will" without really being aware of the fact, and all the time he was gazing blankly at her, trying to remember where he had seen her before.

Away back in the dim, forgotten ages there was a robust, squat, valuable figure; but—this! His brain reeled. He was being married to an utter stranger. His loss was incalculable.



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We will speed over the ensuing months. It goes without saying that Martha became well and strong and abominably vigorous in the matter of appetite. Her days of convalescence—— But why go into them? They are interesting only to the person who is emerging from a period of suffering and fasting. Why dwell upon the reflections of Eddie Ten Eyck as he saw an erstwhile stranger transformed into an old acquaintance before his very eyes? Why go into the painful details attending the stealthy payment of nearly \$17,000 by the party of the first part to the party of the second part, and why tell of the uses to which the latter was compelled to put this meagre fortune almost immediately after acquiring it? No one cares to be harassed by these miserable, mawkish details.

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One really needs to know but one thing: the bridegroom soon stood shorn of all his ill-gotten gains, unless we except the wife of whom no form of adversity could rob him.

A month after the wedding, Eddie was eagerly awaiting the fourth quarterly instalment of his allowance. He was out of debt, it is true, but he never had been poorer in all his life. The thing that appalled him most was the fact that he had unlimited credit and did not possess the courage to take advantage of it. He could have borrowed right and left; he could have run up stupendous accounts; he could have lived like a lord. But Martha, before she was really able to sit up in bed, began to talk about something in a cottage,—something that made him turn pale with desperation,—and bread

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and cheese and kisses, entirely with an eye to thrift and what Eddie considered a nose for squalor. He couldn't imagine anything more squalid than a subsistence on the three commodities mentioned. In fact, he preferred starvation.

Martha harped for hours at a stretch on how economically she could conduct their small establishment, once they got into the house he had bound himself to buy in his days of affluence. She seemed to take it for granted that she would be obliged to skimp and pinch in order to get along on what Eddie would be able to earn.

"Our meat and grocery bills will be almost nothing, Eddie dear," she said one day, with an enthusiasm that discouraged him. "You see, I mean to keep my figure, now that I've got it. I

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sha'n't eat a thing for days at a time. We'll have no meat, nor potatoes, nor sugar——”

“Just bread and cheese,” said he wanly.

“And something else,” she added coquettishly.

“Kisses are fattening,” he said.

“Goodness! Who ever told you that?” she cried in dismay.

“A well-known specialist,” he said, his mind adrift.

“Well, there is one thing sure, Ed-die,” she declared firmly; “we will not go into debt for anything. We positively must keep out of debt. I won't have you worrying about money matters.”

“I'm not likely to,” said he with conviction.

He then began to watch for signs of decrepitude in the General.

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As soon as Martha was strong enough to travel, her step-father suggested that they go South for the winter instead of opening the little house down the street. He went so far as to offer to pay the expenses of the trip as a sort of belated wedding gift.

Eddie objected. He said that his real estate business was in such a state that he couldn't afford to leave it for a day.

"I didn't know you *had* a business," exclaimed the General.

"I am making arrangements to take up a Government claim in Alaska," said his son-in-law grimly.

"Great Scott!"

"I'm going to some place where I can *dig* for gold."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Bitterly."



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“And—and would you subject Martha to the rigours of an Alaskan winter in——”

“Inasmuch as we shall have to subsist on snowballs until you pass in your cheques, General, I think we’d better go where they are fresh and plentiful.”

Fortunately for the bride and groom, everybody that was anybody in Essex gave them a wedding present. Not a few, in a fever of exaltation, gave beyond their means, and a great many of them with unintentional irony gave pickle dishes. By the time they were ready to go into their new home, it was cosily, even handsomely furnished. The General, contrite of heart, spent money lavishly in trying to make the home so attractive for Eddie that he wouldn’t be likely to desert it for something worse.



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The groom's sense of humour was only temporarily dulled. He noted signs of its awakening when he assisted in the unpacking of four cheval mirrors, gifts to the bride from persons who may or may not have been in collusion but who certainly wanted Martha to see herself as others saw her, and, as it turned out, from all sides.

The glow of health—an almost superhuman health—increased in the countenance of Mrs. Edward Ten Eyck. Her hair was a bit slow in restoring itself, and a shade or two darker, but on the other hand, despite all she could do to prevent it, she resumed her natural proportions with a rapidity that was sickening.

It was not long before her figure was unquestionably her own.

Eddie tried to conceal his dismay. He

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even tried to drown it. Their first quarrel grew out of her objection to the presence of intoxicating liquors in the house.

“I don’t approve of whiskey,” she said flatly.

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"But you had it at your house."

"You forget that he was only my step-father."

"He isn't in the past tense yet," said he bitterly.

"I've always maintained that whiskey should be used for medicinal purposes only."

"Then please don't worry about it," said he curtly. "I've ordered a barrel of it."

"For—for medicinal purposes?"

"Strictly."

She studied his face with uneasy alarm in her eyes.

"You — don't feel as though you were going to be ill, do you, dear?"

He moved to the opposite side of the table, involuntarily lifting his left elbow as if to shield himself. She

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stopped half-way. Then he laughed awkwardly and turned the subject.

One day he reached the startling conclusion that she was getting heavier than she had ever been before. It required

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days of contemplation, scrutiny, and development of purpose before he could ask her to step onto the scales at the meat market.

A cold perspiration started on his forehead as he moved the balance along the bar and found it would be necessary to use the two-hundred pound weight instead of the one-hundred, the fifty, and divers small ones that had been sufficient in days of yore.

She weighed two hundred and three pounds.

At nine o'clock that night some one took him home from the Essex Club, and Martha was in hysterics until the doctor, summoned with haste and vehemence, assured her that her husband was not dead.

The approach of springtime found Eddie in a noticeably run-down con-



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dition. Friends and acquaintances began to remark that he was "going to seed in a hurry," or "he's awfully run down at the heel," or "I've never seen such a change in a man."

He was no longer the gay, whilom, inconsequent man about town. The best proof of this was his utter lack of pride in the matter of dress and his carelessness in respect to his personal appearance. Once he had been the beau-ideal of the town. Nowadays he slouched about the streets with a cigarette drooping listlessly between his lips, his face unshaven, his clothes unpressed and dusty. There was always a hunted, far-away look in his eyes.

Habitué of the Club began to notice that he was once more making mathematical calculations on the backs of envelopes or the margins of newspapers

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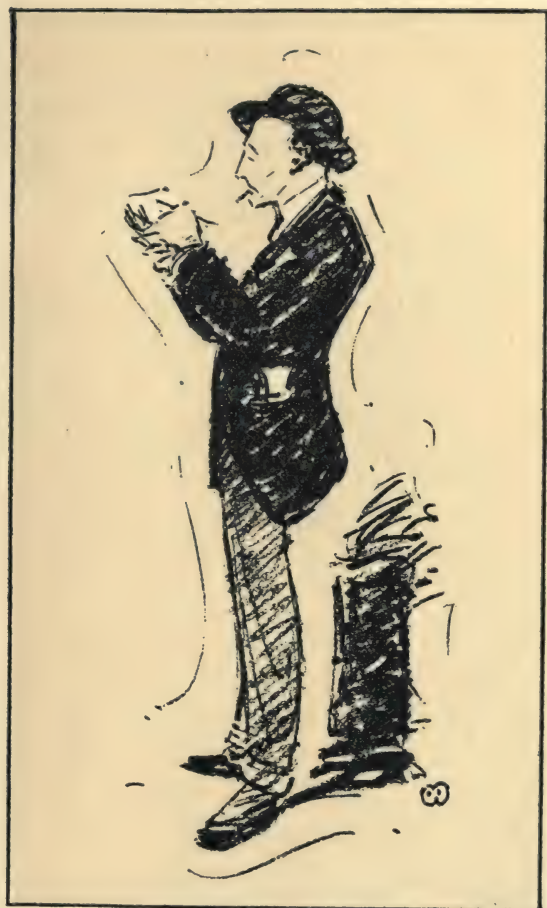
and magazines. No one pretended to explain this queer habit of his, but they observed that his efforts represented sums in multiplication. Occasionally, as if to throw them off the track, he did a sum in subtraction, and there were frequent lapses into simplified addition.

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It was noted, however, that the numerals one, nine, decimal, two and a cipher, invariably in that sequence, figured somewhere in every calculation.

General Gamble could have solved the mystery, but he maintained a rigid silence. In his heart, the old schemer nurtured a fear that sooner or later Eddie would commit suicide or run away, either of which would signify the return of Martha to the mansion she had deserted for a cottage. And he knew that if she ever came back it would be as a permanent visitor.

He encountered his son-in-law frequently at unexpected times and in unusual places, and was never without the feeling that the young man eyed him balefully. He could feel the intensity of that unwavering gaze for hours after meeting Eddie. It was an ardent,



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searching look that seemed to question his right to survive the day.

After such meetings, the General was wont to survey himself long and fearfully in the first mirror or show window that presented itself. He began to wonder if he was in failing health. At times he thought he discerned signs of approaching decrepitude, but his doctor assured him that he was never healthier or happier than he appeared to be at this particular period in his life.

Still, he could not shake off the rather ghastly feeling that Eddie was secretly praying that his days were numbered.

One day at the Club he complained of a severe pain in his back, and the very next day he was shocked to find his son-in-law dressed in sombre black with a strip of crape around his arm. Immediately on seeing the General in his

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usual state of health, Eddie solemnly removed the band from his sleeve and, carefully rolling it up, stuck it into his waistcoat pocket.

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"I'm saving it for a rainy day," said Eddie with a cold-blooded smile.

"Good Heaven!" said the General, and at once felt the pain return to his back.

"Have you seen Martha lately?" asked Eddie, tapping the bell on the table.

"Oh, yes," said the General, settling a little deeper into his chair. "She is looking remarkably well."

"Do you know what she weighs at present?"

"Of course not. She took the scales over to your house. Besides, I don't care a hang."

"Day before yesterday she weighed two hundred and ninety-eight pounds." His voice rose to a shrill screech. "It's a blamed outrage!" He dropped his chin into his hands and went on mut-

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tering vaguely, his eyes glued to the top button of the General's waistcoat.

"By Jove, she *is* doing well."

"She can hardly walk. If she keeps on, she won't be able to see, either. Her



eyes are almost lost. I screwed up the courage to take a long look at her to-day. She has lost her neck en-



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tirely and I haven't the remotest idea where her ears are."

"I—I *do* feel sorry for you, Eddie," cried the General, moved by unexpected compunction.

Eddie rambled on. "Sometimes I sit down and actually watch her grow. You can notice it if you look steadily for a given time."

The two sat stiff and silent for many minutes. Eddie stole a sly glance at his companion's ruddy face.

"You are a remarkably well preserved man, General," he ventured speculatively. "Would you mind telling me your age?"

"I am seventy-one, Eddie, if it is any encouragement to you," said the General eagerly.

"You look good for another ten years," said Eddie hopelessly.

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"I am a little worried about my heart," prevaricated the General. He meant to be magnanimous. Eddie did not look up, but his eyes began to blink rapidly. "There is heart disease in the family, you know."

"Then maybe Martha has—er—has——"

"Has what, my son?"

"I forgot. She is only your step-daughter. I was worried for a moment, that's all."

In the fall of the year, Eddie announced to his father-in-law that Martha was tipping the beam at three hundred and fourteen pounds, three ounces, and increasing daily. The General gave vent to an uneasy laugh, whereupon Eddie, mistaking his motive, launched into a tirade that ended with the frantic wish

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that the old man would hurry up and die.

“Now, Eddie, don’t talk like that! I have about made up my mind to do something handsome for you and Martha. I have practically decided to make her an allowance for clothing and so forth——”

“Clothing!” groaned Eddie. “She doesn’t want clothes. What could she do with ’em? I am the one who needs clothes. Look at me. Look at the frayed edges and see how I shine in the back. There is a patch or two that you can’t see. I put those patches on myself, too. Martha is so darned fat she can’t hold a pair of trousers in her lap. Moreover, she can’t sew with anything smaller than a crochet needle. Look at me! I am growing a beard so that people can’t see my

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Adam's apple.
That's how poor
and thin I'm
getting to be.
Now just listen
a minute; I'll
give you a few
figures that will
paralyse you."

He jerked out
his lead pencil
and with the
rapidity of a
lightning calcu-
lator multiplied,
added, and sub-
tracted.

"She is worth
\$72,403.20 to-
day. What do
you think of



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that? Prove the figures for yourself. Here's the pencil."

"I don't care to——"

"The day of the wedding," went on Eddie wildly, "she weighed in at \$16,972.80, I think. See what I mean? She's bulling the market and I can't realise a cent on her. She's gone up \$55,430 in less than a year. Suffering Isaac! Why couldn't she have weighed that much a year ago?" He was so furious that he chopped off his words in such a way that they sounded like the barking of a dog.

The General pushed back his chair in alarm.

"Calm yourself, Eddie."

"Oh, I'm calm enough."

"Martha will be a very rich woman when I die, and you won't have to——"

"That sounds beautiful. But don't

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you see that she's getting so blamed fat that she's liable to tip over some day and die before I can find any one to help me set her up again? And if that should happen, will you kindly tell me *where I would come in?*"

"You are a heartless, mercenary scoundrel," gasped the General.

"Well, you would be sore, too, if this thing had happened to you," whined Eddie. He sprang to his feet suddenly. "By thunder, I can't stand it a day longer. Good-bye, General. I'm going to skip out."

"Skip out! Leave her? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. She can always find a happy home with her mother and you. I'm off to the——"

"For Heaven's sake," cried the General hoarsely, "don't do that, Eddie.

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Don't you dare do anything like that. I—I—I am sure we can arrange something between us. I'm not a stingy, hard-hearted man, and you know it. You deserve relief. You deserve compensation. I am your father-in-law and, damme, I'll not go back on you in your time of need. I'll make up the amount you have already lost, 'pon my soul I will, Eddie. Stand by your guns, that's all I ask."

A seraphic expression came into Eddie's face. "When?" he demanded.

"Immediately. Can you come to my house this evening? Alone, of course."

"I should say I can!" shouted Eddie, growing two inches taller in an instant. He took the package of crape from his pocket and threw it into a cuspidor. Then he sighed profoundly.

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“Gad, have you ever felt like another man, General? It’s great.”

As the General was past the point where he could risk saying another word, he maintained a strenuous silence.

Eddie indulged in an expansive grin. “You asked if I could come alone. That’s the only way I can come. If you ever expect to see Martha, General, you will have to come to my house to do so. Do you remember that saying about Mahomet and the mountain?”





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